kintsugi

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Summary

The last time Austin heard Callum's voice without anyone else around, it was shaped around Austin's name, desperately calling after him as Austin walked away. Austin hadn't turned back, hands stuffed so deep in his pockets he nearly split the seams. His shoulders were drawn up so high he had a tension headache for days afterward, but he still thinks that hurt less than if he'd risked one last glance back to see the look on Callum's face.

Because it was Austin who had left. It's the same situation he found himself in time and time again, and he can't blame anyone for it except himself.

Notes

Happy Yuletide!! It was an absolute gift to match with you. I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it ;)

See the end of the work for more notes

Austin has had over two years to brace himself for seeing Callum again, but all the time in the world wouldn't be enough to inoculate himself against the feeling of sharing the same space after everything that had happened.

He'd been stressed about it in the preceding weeks, chewing the inside of his mouth so much Kate had taken to flicking him in the cheek every time his jaw clenched. *You're going to crack a tooth*, she said, *and then you'll look like a chipmunk for the entire press tour, and is that what you want? Don't give yourself another headache.*

Austin didn't have the heart to tell her he'd had one ever since he got the e-mail confirming the dates for the press tour, a low-level throb at the base of his skull that built up as the days passed and it drew closer. Tendrils of pain snaked up his neck and around his temples from muscles constantly pulling too tight, but these days it felt like he had them more often than he didn't, so he was used to it.

It's not even like he hasn't seen Callum since Austin told him he couldn't—that *they* couldn't—choking down all the other things he wanted to say at the time, because he couldn't be sure if what they had was what he really wanted or not. He didn't trust the inside of his own head, couldn't untangle the man he was with the man he'd been pretending to be for months on end. There was too much doubt, and he didn't think it was fair, not to himself and not to Callum, to try and build something on a foundation so shaky it was at risk of being knocked over by a stiff breeze.

But briefly being in each other's presence at premieres and parties was different than living in each other's pockets for weeks on end for the sole purpose of selling their camaraderie and chemistry for the entire world to see. Callum hadn't been awkward in a crowded room, dimly lit with drinks flowing. He wrapped Austin up in a hug, holding Austin close like he hadn't broken both of their hearts the last time they'd spoken. Callum tucked his face in Austin's neck like no time and no hurt had passed between them at all, a wide smile on his face and warmth in his eyes that left Austin out of sorts, off-kilter and unbalanced.

Austin has had over two years to get over it, but if he's honest with himself—he doesn't think he's even come close. He attributed the flip in his stomach when the news came down to fear, a cold rush of dread at the idea of what being forced to interact with Callum on camera, as himself, would be like.

Fear wasn't quite right, though. The anticipation fizzed with something more, something bright and eager that made Austin more nervous than outright apprehension would have, but he was anxious all the same.

Because something like excitement crept up the back of his throat to coat his mouth, so thick he could taste it.

Austin is grateful he doesn't have to put up with living out of a hotel for the first leg of press. It means he'll have to wake up earlier than if he were posted up in the middle of the city with everyone else, but falling back into his own bed every night will be worth hauling himself through LA traffic. The only issue with being out of the hotel bubble is it doesn't present him with an easy excuse to get ahold of Callum before the first round of interviews start. Austin doesn't want the first time they see each other for more than a fleeting moment to be in front of a rolling camera, and he doubts Callum will be the first to reach out.

The last time Austin heard Callum's voice without anyone else around, it was shaped around Austin's name, desperately calling after him as Austin walked away. Austin hadn't turned back, hands stuffed so deep in his pockets he nearly split the seams. His shoulders were drawn up so high he had a tension headache for days afterward, but he still thinks that hurt less than if he'd risked one last glance back to see the look on Callum's face.

Because it was Austin who had left. It's the same situation he found himself in time and time again, and he can't blame anyone for it except himself.

Austin is always the one doing the leaving.

He grabs his phone from where he keeps it charging on his desk, unlocking the screen and thumbing away unread notifications to deal with later in favor of scrolling through his messages for a long-since abandoned conversation thread. He never deleted it, just let it get steadily pushed down his text history, buried by a growing list of people who want things from Austin that Austin's never been sure he can give.

It's not even about if he wants to or not. He *wishes* he didn't—not wanting Callum, not wanting to be the person Callum thought he was—that would be easier than the truth.

Two years is a lot of time to reflect, even if Austin's gone out of his way not to think about it. The truth that hurts the most is the one Austin thinks might be reality. He fell hard and fast for Callum, and the doubt and confusion about what was real and what was bleeding over from being in character was just a convenient excuse to not do something that scared him.

Because how much he wanted Callum was terrifying. It was a rush that took Austin's breath away, all-encompassing and overwhelming, and it's been two years but he still feels it anytime he actually lets himself think about Callum. How much Austin wants Callum burns, a fire roaring inside him that has torched out a yawning cavern in Austin's chest, leaving him hollow without Callum there to fill it back up.

Callum probably doesn't want anything to do with him anymore. There's only one way to know for sure, but before anything else, Austin owes him an apology.

Hey, Austin types out. *Hope you made it into town alright. You busy?*

He bites down on his bottom lip, debating the phrasing, but if he writes and rewrites the message until it feels right he knows he'll never hit send. As soon as he taps the arrow, an in-progress text bubble pops up before Austin can put his phone down and run his hands through his hair, and a reply comes through before Austin has any time to wonder if he's making a mistake or not.

Callum sends a pin with the address of his hotel and his room number, nothing else. Austin doesn't know what he's supposed to do with that. Sure, he knows where Callum's staying now, but that wouldn't have been hard to figure out on his own. What does Callum expect him to do with that information? Just show up uninvited, unannounced? Austin would rather rip all his nails back to the quick, leaving his fingertips raw and bleeding.

His phone buzzes again, the vibration pulsating in his palm as his screen lights up from where it went dark from disuse.

I'll be here all afternoon if you want to come by.

Austin gives Callum a heads up when he's on his way over. The sun's only starting to set, stretching shadows out long and washing the freeway in warm late-afternoon light. Austin spends the drive somewhere to the left of present, shifting between resurfaced memories and running through every possible script of how he thinks talking to Callum is going to go. It doesn't feel real, and he's trying not to let that feel like an omen, because not being able to trust what was in front of him is what got him into this mess in the first place.

He grips the steering wheel, grounding himself in the texture of the leather. He runs his thumb back and forth over the stitching. He breathes, in and out, as he pulls into the valet lane in front of Callum's hotel. If he parked himself, he's not sure he'd be able to will his legs out of the car; he'd end up sitting in the garage for too long to be defensible, avoiding the inevitable.

But he already told Callum he was coming, so he leaves the car running and trades positions with the valet driver, not feeling anywhere as steady as he should when his feet find solid ground.

Austin doesn't know what he was expecting to be faced with when he finally finds himself outside Callum's door, waiting for it to swing open. Callum had never been anything less than cordial with him, but they've also never been alone together. He never would have guessed that he'd be confronted with the full force of Callum's smile. It unfurls slowly, lips stretching out until his mouth takes up most of his face, cheeks round and eyes crinkling like he's *happy* Austin's here. It sucks all the air out of the hallway, suffocating Austin with the intensity of its shine.

The moment drags on like a suspended note, and Austin shakes himself out of his reverie in anticipation of its end, wringing his hands by his side when he realizes they're still standing on either side of the open doorway, staring at each other without doing anything else.

"Hey," Austin finally utters, an echo of the text he'd sent earlier that day. The ringing in his ears doesn't stop, and his fingers itch to curl back inside the safety of his pockets, but he fights the urge, balling them to fists before extending them out again.

Callum lets out a huff of a laugh and steps to the side, clearing the doorway in silent invitation. He hovers close enough that Austin brushes by his chest as he crosses the threshold, and the grazing

contact isn't enough for the warmth of Callum's body to seep through the thick canvas of Austin's jacket, but Austin swears he can feel it anyway. Heat radiates into his arm, spreading to his shoulder and across his chest. It sits on his sternum, a glowing ember that threatens to singe his skin, reminding Austin how close he is to something he's already burned himself on before.

"I was about to have a smoke, do you mind?" Callum asks, lazily gesturing toward the balcony. The sliding door is open, and a cool breeze softly floats into the room.

"That's fine," Austin says, apparently only capable of single-syllable words. He's not sure what else to say, but it doesn't feel right for his first act upon entering Callum's space to be a denial. He's already deprived Callum of enough as it is; being agreeable feels like the least he can do.

For all that Austin has been ruminating over what it would be like to be around Callum again, being in his presence doesn't feel awkward. He's wearing shorts and a hoodie, tall socks pulled up to his calves under a pair of hotel slippers, and he should look ridiculous, but mostly he looks comfortable. It's Callum, same as he ever was: so relaxed and easy Austin can only feel that way, too.

He follows Callum outside, closing the door behind him so the smell doesn't drift inside. There's enough room on the balcony for a small glass-top table and two chairs, black wrought-iron, and the legs grind across the raw concrete floor when Callum drags one out to sit down. He slumps into it, shoulders rounding as he reaches out to snag a pack of cigarettes already on the table, corners soft and crumpled from where they must have been smashed inside Callum's pockets.

LA in January is far from cold, but the waning sun has left the air crisp, and Austin's glad for his extra layers as he settles into the chair opposite Callum. He can't bring himself to look as Callum pinches the end of a cigarette between his lips and moves to light it, which leaves him searching for something else to stare at instead.

He doesn't get far before his eyes catch on the only other object sitting on the table.

"Is that—" Austin starts to ask, words coming out before he can stop himself, because *obviously* it is. The ashtray is blatantly handmade, thick-walled and glaze a little uneven, and since Austin's the one who made it, he knows better than to ask. "You kept it?"

Callum looks between the ashtray and Austin, something blooming in his eyes that Austin can't read. A pang of regret pulses through him, because there used to be a time when Austin understood Callum better than he understood himself—or he thought he did, anyway.

Austin was so convinced the uncertainty was the problem. He couldn't stop second-guessing himself. He told himself he couldn't trust if it was Callum that he knew, or if they both got lost in the act and too much had spilled over, traits and emotions blending together until Austin couldn't be sure where the characters ended and his relationship with Callum began. It wasn't good, and Austin needed time to get his head on right, but it's becoming more clear that was only part of the problem.

And the thing about problems is that they're meant to be solved.

"Course I kept it," Callum says. He taps his cigarette on the edge, ashing the end before bringing it back up to his mouth for another drag, lips puckering around the filter. "Why wouldn't I?"

Austin doesn't know.

The sun sinks low in the sky behind Callum, long rays of golden light bouncing all over the balcony and making everything glow. If this were a movie, right now would be a big moment. A swirl of colors painting the clouds to set the scene, the two of them finally alone together, and a mounting tension that's bound to burst. Music would be swelling, some heartstring-pulling score, but all Austin can hear is the muffled sound of traffic in the distance. None of the lines Austin ran for himself in the car feel fitting now that Callum is in front of him, living and breathing, solid and real. "I thought about calling you, but I didn't think you'd pick up."

"I thought about it, too," Callum says, "but I didn't want to have this conversation over the phone."

"What conversation?" Austin asks. He knows what he needs to say to Callum, but he doesn't have the first idea of what Callum wants to say to him.

"Austin." Callum's tone is knowing, but above all, he sounds *tired*. It still doesn't stop the thrill of hearing him say Austin's name. "Why are you here?"

Austin opens his mouth, then closes it. Callum sucks in another mouthful of smoke, the cherry on the end blistering bright red, and a

deep craving aches inside Austin. He hasn't jonesed this bad for a cigarette in months, but all the sudden the inside of his mouth tastes like tar and nicotine, and he wishes it was because he had the real thing, if only so he'd have something to do with his hands.

"I just figured we should, I don't know," Austin pauses, waving a hand. "Clear the air."

Callum blows a stream of smoke out through his nose. It wafts between them in a haze, and Callum doesn't even have to say the joke; all he has to do is lift an eyebrow and Austin already knows the punchline.

"Fuck off," Austin says, but he's smiling so wide his cheeks hurt, because *fuck*—he's missed this. Missed *Callum*. The enormity of how much Austin's missed him hits him in its totality, a forceful blow to his solar plexus that steals all the air out of his lungs.

He tried so hard not to dwell on it. He told himself he made a choice, and he had to live with it and move on from it.

But he hadn't moved on, and he isn't sure he's been living with it so much as he's been floating from one day to the next, week after week until the next thing he knew it'd been two *years*, and he was left feeling like it was too late to try and fix what he'd been the one to break.

Callum sits quietly, like he's waiting for Austin to keep going. He'd always been good at that—at forcing Austin to fill the space Austin usually weaved his way out of. Austin has made an art of filling a conversation without ever saying anything of substance, but Callum never let him get away with it. He never called Austin out on anything, never actually addressed it, but there was always an amused glint in his eye every time Austin floundered for something to say.

Most people don't have the patience to wait Austin out, because that's what it usually comes down to. With a long enough silence, Austin will finally start talking, and eventually he'll start saying things that matter.

Austin might have avoided mulling over all the what-ifs, but when nights got late enough, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about how he should apologize to Callum for the way things went down. He doesn't regret leaving, exactly, but he does wish that he'd done it differently. He wishes a lot of things were different.

Austin clears his throat. “I’m sorry,” he begins, straightforward and sincere. Callum’s eyebrows raise in tandem, like he wasn’t expecting those particular words to come out of Austin’s mouth. He stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray that Austin made him, that Callum not only kept but *carries with him,* dropping the butt inside the dish before relaxing back into his chair in a wide-open sprawl. Austin wets his lips, eyes dropping to the distorted spread of Callum’s thighs under the textured glass tabletop before lifting to meet Callum’s gaze, intent and focused, a small curl beginning to form at the corner of his mouth from catching Austin staring.

“I wasn’t in a very good place, when we—when *I*—left things,” Austin continues, correcting himself when Callum’s expression flickers at the use of *we,* like Callum had any say in the matter. “I was doing better than I was at the start, you know? Things weren’t bad anymore, so I think I tricked myself into thinking that meant I was good.”

“Did I ever give you the impression that I needed you to be some idealized version of yourself, or that you had to have all the answers?” Callum asks, dismissing Austin’s reply before he can even try to answer with a flap of his hand. “All I ever wanted was for you to be honest with me, and for you to be willing to try. We didn’t have to have it all figured out in the moment, you know? But I really would have liked to try and figure it out with you.”

Austin’s mouth feels like it’s full of sawdust, so dry he can barely swallow. “I barely knew who I was, let alone what I wanted.”

“Do you know what you want now?” Callum asks, cutting past all the fat to get to the meat of the situation.

Austin’s smile stretches thin, the edges of it brittle in its attempted honesty. “I know we were friends before we were anything else,” he carefully explains, “and I know that, everything else aside, I miss my friend.”

The muscle along Callum’s jaw flutters, skin rippling as he clenches his teeth, but there’s no tension in his voice when he says, “Everything else aside, huh?”

Austin doesn’t let the false-casual tone of Callum’s voice fool him; he knows a pivotal question when he hears it. How he answers is going to be a turning point, for better or worse. “I know what I don’t want more than I know what I want,” Austin admits. It’s not the best answer, but it’s the truth, and he doesn’t want to lie to Callum and

pretend he's figured out more than he has. "And I don't want to be presumptuous."

"If I gave you permission to presume?" Callum asks, a small smirk turning up the corner of his mouth.

This time, when Austin smiles, it doesn't feel as stiff. It's softer. More real. "Then I'd say we should have a different conversation, at some point."

Callum's head tilts, all easy curiosity, like it's not hard for him to ask the things he wants to know. "Not now?"

"Nah." Austin kicks his foot out, gently nudging the toe of his shoe against Callum's sock-covered ankle. "Let's just enjoy the rest of the sunset, for now."

Callum beams at him, the grin that's a real head turner, the strangers-stop-in-their-tracks to stare kind of smile. The one that scrunches his nose and crinkles his eyes, a joy that's unencumbered by what it makes him look like, a lack of self-consciousness that only ends up making him look more stunning. Right now it's directed at Austin and Austin alone, and the parts of Austin that have felt put together wrong for a long time, pieces jammed out of order into the wrong places, suddenly feel realigned.

The first day of press always drags on the longest. It's when the questions still feel new, when Austin really takes the time to consider his answers instead of spitting them out by rote. He still hasn't quite acclimated to being so close to Callum, close enough that their upper arms brush if either one of them shifts their weight to adjust the way they're sitting.

It's distracting.

Austin is more restless than usual, and by the end of the day he's crossing and uncrossing his legs every two minutes, unable to find a position he can stay in for more than a few questions. He thought he was playing it off well enough, but from the way Callum keeps shooting him glances out of the corner of his eye, his fidgeting is noticeable to more than just himself.

Callum knocks his ankle against Austin's shin when he starts bobbing his heel up and down, knee rising and falling sewing machine needle quick. Austin tries to catch his gaze, but Callum's focused on the interviewer, shoulders relaxed as he talks animatedly with his hands, taking the lead on answering a question Austin didn't even notice he missed. Austin bites down on the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling stupidly at having even the thinnest sliver of Callum's attention, knocking his foot back into Callum's as he nods along to Callum's retelling of a story Austin's already heard today like he's hearing it for the first time.

The thing between them now, for all that it can barely be called a thing, feels fragile. It's not even a closed bud waiting to bloom; it's a seedling, a tender little shoot that's only begun to take root.

But it feels like a real second chance, and Austin doesn't intend to squander it.

The days pass by in a blur from there, the beats of their scripts smoothed out and the choreography of the whole song and dance perfectly memorized. It would be easy to let his mind shut off entirely, getting asked the same questions over and over, but Callum has a way of making every day feel new. Every now and then, Austin is so drawn in to the magnetic pull of Callum's charisma that he forgets the cameras are even there.

There's a hook in Austin's chest, and it tugs him closer to Callum more and more every day, moments compounding until Austin doesn't remember what it was like to live without the hitch in his breath from the pull. It throws him off his game, and he knows he needs to get it together—he's dropped the ball on more questions on this tour than he ever has in the past.

But every time Austin spaces out on an answer because he wasn't listening as well as he should have been, Callum swoops in so smoothly it's not even recognizable that he's rescuing Austin from another flub. Callum is all effusive charm, a personality so personable it attracts everyone's focus like static cling.

The biggest reality check is when Austin realizes watching *Callum's* focus be directed at someone else makes him rankle.

Callum isn't his, not anymore. Austin isn't even sure Callum was ever his to begin with, but he certainly isn't now. Knowing that doesn't do anything to stifle the jolt of jealousy that twists at his insides when a

pretty blonde thing turns up her allure, shamelessly flirting with Callum at the end of a long day.

It's their last shoot. Austin lost track of what hour they were on three interviewers ago. He's tired, and he's hungry, and he still can't justify the sinking feeling in his gut when Callum flirts back. His face goes hot, cheeks burning from more than just the heat radiating off the lights on set; a streak of possession slithers up his spine, and he's filled with the urge to stake a claim that isn't yet his to take.

Austin rearranges his legs. His foot makes contact with Callum's gently enough that it could be written off as an accident, if it weren't for the way Austin nudges him a second time, kicking up against the sole of Callum's shoe. When Callum doesn't react, just carries on answering the question as if he'd never been interrupted, Austin does it again.

The corner of Callum's mouth quirks, then. His eyes flick to Austin, lightning fast, teeth flashing as he smiles back to camera without missing a beat.

When Callum kicks out in retaliation, warmth pools low in Austin's stomach. The satisfaction that courses through him at goading Callum into taking the bait bolsters the truth that he's been slowly but steadily unpacking.

Austin wants Callum's attention. He wants all of his focus, and he doesn't want to share. When Callum had told him what he'd expected of Austin the first night they'd seen each other again, he'd made it sound so easy. Austin wants that—he wants to not worry so much about the here and now. He wants to find a way to be comfortable enough to trust he can figure out the rest of it later.

At the end of it all, Austin wants to figure it out with Callum, just like Callum said. Together.

They have two days off before they fly to London and do it all over again.

Austin wakes up clearheaded, the fog that had settled over him burning off in the break of day. He hadn't realized how thick it had

become until he finally felt its absence, the sharpness of his surroundings brought back into focus without a haze distorting the edges of everything.

He spent so much time not being able to delineate where one thing ended and another thing began, but the muddiness is gone. When he looks at Callum, he doesn't see Bucky overlaid on top of him anymore. He hasn't in a long while. There's no confusion, no doubt.

Austin invites him over.

He waits until early afternoon, tamping down on the urge to call before he'd even had breakfast.

Going to fire up the pizza oven tonight, he texts. *You want in?*

There's a batch of dough in the fridge that he's been resting, experimenting with a long ferment in search of the perfect crust. He wants crispy edges and a base that will hold up to being loaded with toppings, but still stays soft inside after the crunch of the first bite.

He tells Callum all about the trials and errors he's had when he finally comes over, lighting the wood-fired oven so it can preheat. It takes about an hour to get to temperature, so they have plenty of time before they need to stretch out the dough and start assembling, and they shoot the shit in Austin's back yard while they wait.

Austin has a nice little outdoor seating area, a firepit opposite the pizza oven and enough patio furniture that he never runs out of places for people to sit when he has friends over. Despite the variety of options to choose from, Callum sits down next to Austin on one of the sectionals. He's close enough that their knees touch, and he never once puts in the effort to move away.

It feels good. It feels like the kind of afternoon Austin wants to have all the time, every chance he can get.

After a while, Callum pulls his ever-present pack of cigarettes out of his pocket of his baggy jeans, fishing the ashtray out next. He drops it unceremoniously on the low table in front of the sofa.

"You just carry that thing around with you all the time, then?" Austin teases, eyebrows raised, tone deceptively light for how seriously he wants to know the answer. The curiosity has been eating away at him, because he can't help but wonder if it's a sign that Callum is still hanging onto it after all this time.

Callum rubs the back of his neck. “I know you quit, so I just figured you wouldn’t have anything.”

Austin’s throat goes thick, a lump sticking in the middle of his swallow. It’s just an ashtray, but it feels significant, like it’s so much more than that. It’s a talisman, a totem of their time together that Callum made an active choice not to part with.

It has to mean something.

Austin has a choice that he needs to make, too. It’s still terrifying, but he’s choosing to be brave.

Callum taps the bottom of the pack against the base of his palm, and then flips the top open one-handed. Austin reaches out, and his fingers curl around Callum’s wrist to stop him from slipping a cigarette out before he realizes he’s made the move. Callum goes still, glancing over to Austin with an unspoken question in his eyes. “You mind?”

“No, I don’t mind,” Austin says. “Just, before you do…” he trails off. He leans in closer to Callum in lieu of finishing the thought. Callum doesn’t meet him halfway, but he doesn’t pull away, either. He holds himself in place, letting Austin slowly encroach on his space.

Austin lets go of his arm to take the pack of cigarettes from Callum’s loose grip, and he tosses them on the table without taking his eyes off of him.

“Just what?” Callum asks, voice pitched low, like he doesn’t already know.

Austin flattens his hand on the front of Callum’s chest, fingers splaying out wide. He can feel Callum’s heartbeat through the thin layer of his shirt, and Austin takes a moment to bask in it—the swell of Callum’s pec under his palm, soft flesh and blood.

For the first time in a long time, Austin is certain they’re on the same page. “Just this,” he says, and then he slides his hand up to wrap around the back of Callum’s neck, eyes dropping down to zero in on the pink flush of Callum’s mouth before he reels him in.

Callum’s hand closes around Austin’s forearm as his lips part. They slot perfectly against Austin’s, melding together in an effortless kiss, and Austin revels in it, breathing Callum in without pressing for more. Just the barest touch of their mouths together is enough to set Austin aglow, a content fulfillment filling him up until he’s tingling from his

fingertips to his toes.

Austin would be more than happy to stay here just like this, but Callum pulls back a hairsbreadth, enough that Austin flutters his eyes open to find Callum intently scanning across Austin's face, studying his expression.

"Fuck, sweetheart," Callum swears, firmly squeezing Austin's arm. "You don't even know what you do to me, do you?"

"I don't," Austin admits, because no matter how much Austin hopes for, there's always been a part of him that's never quite believed it. "But you could show me, if you want."

His eyes drift down to Callum's mouth, unchanged from the way they looked before they'd kissed. There's no visible sign anything had happened, and it doesn't sit right in Austin's chest. He feels pulled apart and rearranged, and he wants to see tangible proof of the transformation.

Austin wants Callum to wear evidence that they mean something to each other. He wants to be marked up by Callum in turn.

He swings a leg across Callum to straddle his thighs, decisively moving to sit heavily in his lap. He braces his hands on the back of the sofa, arms framing Callum's shoulders as he leans forward, face hovering close enough that their noses brush but their lips remain a breath away. Callum clutches Austin's back, gripping his shirt hard enough that even when he lets go, Austin's sure there will be wrinkles in the shape of his hand print, fabric twisting up between his fingers tight enough to leave a lasting impression.

"You have to mean it, Austin," Callum says. The words ghost over Austin's lips, and Austin feels pinned down by the gravity of them, anchored by their weight.

"Of course I mean it." Austin's forehead goes tense as he frowns. "I've always meant it."

Callum opens his mouth like he's going to say something else, a rebuttal on the tip of his tongue, but he closes it and then closes his eyes, too, taking in an unsteady breath as Austin watches his eyes move restlessly under his eyelids. When Callum opens them back up, they're clear of whatever conflict Callum seemed to be wrestling with, full of determined resolve.

He grabs Austin by the back of the neck and drags him in until their mouths collide. It's a mess of slick lips and searching tongues from there, heatedly licking into each other in a mutual demand for more. Austin lifts his arms so Callum can ruck his shirt up and off, but it gets stuck in his armpits, tangling Austin's arms overhead until he manages to wiggle out of it. They laugh breathlessly against each other as Callum tosses Austin's shirt to the side, lips carelessly smearing together in abandon.

Austin feels like he can't get enough, and can't give enough in return. Their hands wander all over, desperately relearning all the places they'd lost familiarity with, not a single ounce of finesse in their movements. It's pure instinct, and it makes Austin's head spin, dizzy with everything that's yet to come.

Callum scoops a strong arm under Austin's ass, tightening his other arm around Austin's back as he hoists him up off his lap. He lifts Austin just enough to flip their positions, throwing Austin onto his back and crawling on top of him, but the flurry of their limbs abruptly jostles the table. Austin's foot collides with it in a loud, resonant thunk, sending its legs off balance and all the contents on top of it to the ground in a sudden crash.

"*Shit,"* Callum swears, his whole body freezing as his voice fractures into something high and vulnerable. Austin feels like he's watching a slow motion replay as Callum reaches down to pick up a ceramic shard, a sharp remnant of the now-shattered ashtray.

"Oh," Austin says, taking in the open devastation on Callum's face as he stares down at the mess of broken pieces on the patio tiles. His breath is coming in heavy bursts, but he tries to be gentle as he lays a tentative hand on Callum's shoulder, softly reassuring. "Hey, it's okay."

Callum tenses, coiling up into a defensive posture. "It's *not* okay."

"Listen, I can make you a new one—"

"I don't want a new one." Callum thumbs at the edge of the piece in his hand, expression shuttering until his face goes completely blank. "It wouldn't be the same."

Austin doesn't know how to respond to that, but Callum keeps talking before he has a chance to figure it out.

"This was a fucking stupid idea, anyway," Callum mutters under his

breath, like he's talking to himself, a truth Austin wasn't meant to hear. Austin's chest tightens, constricting around a protest he doesn't dare to speak. Callum drops the chunk of ceramic on the table and then rubs his hand over the flat press of his mouth, head shaking at whatever thoughts he's holding back. "Listen, I need to go."

Austin is struck with a disquieting sense of deja-vu, only this time he's the one struck dumb, stuck stock-still as he watches Callum stand up. "Cal," he finally manages to say, but it's not enough to make Callum stay. He feels thrown from his body, all the memories from then and now folding over in Austin's head until he can't make sense of anything that's happening.

"Sorry for the mess," Callum says, stilted, like he doesn't want to be saying more but can't bring himself to just turn around and leave. Not like Austin had. "Sorry for—" He stops, visibly taking a breath before continuing, lamely, one hand up in half-surrender. "All of it, I guess."

"Callum," Austin pleads, taking a step to try and close the distance between them before the gap widens into a chasm he can't cross. "What's happening right now?"

"I can't do this," Callum tells him. "I can't go through it again."

Goosebumps rise on Austin's skin as the chill in the air finally hits him, because he's shirtless, and it's January, and Callum takes all of the warmth in Austin's body with him as he walks away. Austin picks up a piece of broken pottery, clenching down until the sharp edges cut into the skin on his palm.

He might not be able to fix the thing between them, but he's going to do his best to fix this.

Nowhere online Austin looks has the right supplies with shipping that delivers fast enough, so he sends Kate a list.

Can you find somewhere that sells this in person? Need it ASAP.

Austin would go out and hunt everything down himself, but he has three different scripts he needs to review and get back to James about by the end of the day, so there's just not enough time.

He had carefully collected all the remnants of the ashtray and brought them inside after Callum had left, after all of Austin's visions of a cozy night and a lazy morning spent together abruptly smashed to pieces alongside it. They sit spread out on his dining room table, making a mockery of what could have been. All things considered, it hadn't broken too badly—the ceramic cracked in several large chunks rather than splintering into countless tiny shards, so Austin thinks repairing it is something he can actually manage.

I'm not even going to ask, Kate responds sometime later, *but I'm on it.*

She shows up later with her hair in disarray, loose strands falling out of her ponytail and down around her face, a plastic bag in hand. "Don't ask how many places I had to call to find all this," she says, holding the bag out for Austin to take. "It better be worth it, is all I'm saying."

Austin opens the bag, peeking inside at the contents. Everything he needs is there. "I'm hoping it will be," he tells her. "It's the least I can do, even if it's not."

Kate sighs, a look in her eye giving away that she knows he's not just talking about making her run around town for glorified craft supplies. "Let me know if you need anything else, alright? Anything."

Austin flattens his lips together as he nods. "I will," he says. "Thank you, by the way—I know this kind of thing isn't actually your job, but I really appreciate it."

Kate smiles, gently reassuring. "People who care about you will help you when you ask them to, Austin. You just have to ask."

Austin shakes everything out of the bag onto the table after saying goodbye, and he picks up the pot of lacquer and a paintbrush to begin with. He wanted to do this the right way, not just superglue everything back together and hope for the best. He'd stayed up too late last night watching video after video, and he thinks he has a good enough idea of the process in order to make it work.

He unscrews the pot and stirs the thick black lacquer until it's an even consistency. He dips the tip of the brush into the pot and picks up the biggest piece of the ashtray to start with, carefully painting along the broken edge before pressing an adjoining piece together to create a seam. He works slowly, piece by piece, mending individual sections until it starts to come together as a complete whole.

With every piece Austin puts back in its proper place, his conviction grows stronger.

He needs to have that conversation with Callum, the one he'd alluded to but never followed through on. He was hoping to get to it last night before things went awry, but it's not enough to make Austin give up. Not when they were finally making progress.

Callum means too much to Austin to let him go without getting the chance to try.

Once he pieces the ashtray back together, Austin takes a second, clean brush, and swirls it in the dry gold dust. He taps off the excess on the side of the container and then buffs gold into the dark lacquered veins, transforming them from something utilitarian into something beautiful.

By the time he's finished, the ashtray isn't the same as when it was new, when Austin first made it. It's different, but Austin isn't the same as he was back then either. He's different too.

Austin's better, now. He can only hope Callum will be able to see that.

Austin doesn't know if Callum is still at the hotel when he knocks on the door. He'd mentioned being on the same flight to London as Austin, but that was a week ago, and Austin wouldn't blame Callum if he up and rebooked his ticket as soon as things went sideways.

Not knowing isn't going to stop Austin anymore.

It's late enough that it's bordering on impolite, but Callum doesn't take long to answer. He doesn't look particularly surprised to see Austin, either; there's resignation in the slump of his shoulders, and his face is passive, if stoic. Dark circles hollow out his eyes, and the knowledge that it's all Austin's fault makes his heart ache.

Austin grips the strap of his bag. "I know I already apologized to you," he begins, "but I don't think I did a very good job." He takes a deep breath in, and doesn't look away from Callum's tired eyes. "I would really like the chance to try again, if you'd let me."

Callum nods, stepping aside to let Austin in. Austin hadn't paid much attention to the room itself the last time he was here, but there's a sleek leather couch against the wall opposite the bed, sharp modern lines to match the abstract art hanging above it. Callum guides them over to it, and when he sits in the far corner, Austin mirrors him on the opposite side.

It is, at least, more comfortable than it looks.

Callum scratches at the back of his neck, mouth twisted in a contrite curl. "I also owe you a better apology than the one you got," he says. "I've been all in my head, got emotionally caught up, and I overreacted when I shouldn't have."

"What were you in your head about?" Austin asks, because Callum might as well have stolen those words directly out of Austin's mouth.

"Whether you really wanted this," Callum says with a sigh. "Wanted *me,* who I am now. Not just the idea of me, or the idea of what we could have been."

Callum's words slice through Austin. It hurts, seeing proof of the pain Austin had put him through—the doubt, the insecurity, the inability to trust Austin. Austin made Callum feel all the things that made Austin run in the first place, all because he hadn't been able to be up front about what was going on.

It's time for Austin to finally put all his cards on the table.

He reaches down to rifle through his bag until his hand closes over the cool ceramic of the repaired ashtray. He pulls it out slowly, and then scoots a little closer to Callum on the couch, silently presenting it to him. Austin will explain, but he doesn't want to start by speaking. He doesn't want it to come off like he's justifying himself, or making an excuse. He wants to *show* Callum, and see what Callum makes of it.

The ashtray takes up most of his palm, speckled blue glaze shot through with threads of bright gold where Austin had painstakingly pieced it back together. He'd cleaned all the ash and dirt from it before he'd started repairing it, so it shines like it's new, glossy surface reflecting the solitary lamp that's lighting the room.

"Austin," Callum says, surprised. He looks lost for words, eyes wide as he processes the sight in front of him. His hand rushes out to grab it, but then he stops, like he's unsure if he should touch it or not. Austin tips it in Callum's direction, signaling him to go ahead, and when

Callum takes it in his hands, he carefully traces his fingertips over the golden grooves. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I did,” Austin disagrees.

The corner of Callum’s mouth lifts with the smallest of crooked grins. “Nobody else would have done this.”

“I wanted to fix it,” Austin insists. There’s a second confession that wants escape, and Austin stops himself from biting down and keeping it trapped inside, letting himself admit what he’s actually thinking for once. “I think I wanted to prove to myself that things don’t have to stay broken.”

“Austin,” Callum says again, but Austin holds up a hand, telling him to wait. He needs to get through this.

“I want—I still don’t know exactly what I want, to be completely honest with you, but I’m not as afraid of that as I used to be. And I know, more than anything, that I don’t want to lose you again.” Austin has started to wonder if the reason he was never sure about what he wanted from Callum was because he never truly let himself consider what it would mean to actually have him. If the idea of getting to keep him was too much to conceptualize, so he didn’t even try. “I want to find out what it means to try to do this, whatever it is. I want to figure it out *with you*.” Austin’s voice cracks, but he keeps going, forging forward in the face of what’s at stake. “I want to try, Callum. I want to figure out what it means to be together.”

Callum carefully sets the ashtray down on the end table next to the couch, safely out of reach from any errant limbs. “We have a lot we need to talk about,” Callum says, “but what I really need is for you to come here.”

Austin scrambles across the couch, unbridled yearning spilling out of his skin and sinking into Callum when they finally touch. When they kiss, it’s not any less passionate than the kiss on Austin’s patio, but there’s something unhurried in it now; the desperation has given way to hopeful eagerness, a longing that’s still hungry but no longer starved.

“Can we,” Austin starts to ask, but he gets distracted by the glide of Callum’s lips as he kisses across Austin’s jaw, underneath his ear, all the way down to the spot on Austin’s neck that makes his eyes roll back into his head. Austin shudders when Callum sucks the sensitive skin into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth. “*Bed.*”

Callum chuckles, warm breath puffing against Austin's throat. It makes the temperature of Austin's blood rise, pure liquid heat coursing through his veins. Callum presses another open-mouthed kiss into Austin's skin, and then says, "After you."

They were never bad at this part. It's a familiar routine, and Austin falls back into it like they've never missed a day. It doesn't feel like it's been over two years since the last time, seamlessly stripping each other of their clothes, leaving a trail of garments strewn across the floor before they collapse onto the mattress together.

"Hold on, hold on," Callum says with a gasp, breaking away with a hand pressed flat to Austin's chest. "Before neither of us wants to get up," he continues, somewhat nonsensically, and then he slips out of the bed and into the en-suite. He returns with a tube of lube and a foil packet crinkled in his hand.

Austin's legs unconsciously spread at the sight, an ingrained response to seeing Callum stalking toward him with obvious intent, but his understanding for how the night is going to unfold gets turned on its head when Callum speaks.

"I want you to fuck me," Callum announces, pushing the supplies into Austin's hands.

"Oh." Austin's eyes dart from Callum's face down to where their hands are tangled around the bottle of lube and back again. "We've never—"

"I know," Callum says, a placating tone at odds with his smirk, "because you always assumed."

"I didn't know—"

"Austin," Callum interrupts. The hint of an amused laugh threatens to break free, but Austin is still reeling, unable to appreciate the humor in the moment. "You never *asked*. And that was the problem, right? You never asked, and I never corrected your assumptions. We never actually talked about anything." He wraps Austin's fingers around the bottle, squeezing tightly before letting go. "But that was before, and this is now. Right now I'm telling you I want you to fuck me, and then we're going to talk about a metric ton of shit after."

Austin blinks, and Callum takes advantage of the way his mouth is parted open in surprise, kissing him hard. A broad hand comes up to cup the back of Austin's head, and Austin melts into Callum's embrace until they have to break for air.

Callum crawls onto the bed, situating himself on his hands and knees right in the center of it. He looks over his shoulder, eyebrows high as he waits for Austin to get with the program, and Austin's hands feel clumsy as he gracelessly flips the cap on the lube and slicks his fingers. He slips out of himself entirely as he opens Callum up, honing in on every flutter of Callum's body, the way his muscles contract and release in time with every catch of his breath. Austin wants to turn Callum over, wants to memorize the evolution of every microexpression on his face, but he's so lost in Callum's reactions in his current state that he doesn't bother changing their positions until Callum calls out his name, strained and needy.

Austin swallows, forcing himself back inside the moment instead of continuing to let himself live outside of it. He squeezes Callum's hip, urging him onto his back, and as soon as they lock eyes Austin feels lit up from the inside, electricity sparking under his skin.

Callum's neck is blotchy with red patches, a flush that runs down onto his chest and up high on his cheeks. Every nerve ending Austin has sings at the sight of him, glassy-eyed and looking at Austin like there's no place else he'd rather be.

Like there's no one else he wants.

Austin leans down to kiss him, because he can. "I really fucking missed you," he admits, hands skimming up Callum's sides to trace over his waistline and trail across his ribs. Austin is overwhelmed with all the places he wants to touch, all the places he thought he might not ever be able to feel again, and Callum wraps his arms around Austin, pulling him in close as he maps out the planes of Austin's back in kind.

"You don't have to miss me anymore," Callum tells him, words breathed directly into Austin's mouth, a reassurance that fills his lungs and makes him feel like he's exactly where he's supposed to be. "I'm right here."

Austin tries to wrestle with the condom without moving out of Callum's hold, reaching between the press of their bodies as he fumbles with the wrapper. The foil slips between his still lube-slick fingers, and he fails at tearing it open enough times that a low laugh reverberates through Callum's chest, vibrating into Austin.

"Give it here," Callum says, unwinding his arms from Austin's shoulders to take the condom from Austin's hands. He rips it open in

one smooth motion, and a punched-out noise escapes Austin's lips when Callum confidently grasps the base of Austin's dick, pinching the tip of the condom before rolling it into place.

Stars dance behind Austin's eyes, and he feels woozy, drunk off the pleasure that's racing through him. He's swollen with a desire that only intensifies when Callum gets him wet, lube audibly squelching between his fingers. Austin's barely breathing, heart pounding heavily inside his ribcage as he folds one of Callum's knees up into his armpit.

He braces himself on Callum's shin as he lines up and presses in, mouth falling open with a gasp as soon as he's inside. The tight heat makes Austin's toes curl, and he inches deeper, sucking in a heaving lungful of air before he folds himself over Callum entirely.

Austin buries his face in the curve of Callum's neck when he bottoms out, hips glued to the back of Callum's thighs. He holds himself still, desperately clinging to any kind of control he can find. He pants raggedly against Callum's throat, and Callum reaches up to tangle a hand in Austin's hair, combing through messy strands as Austin nuzzles even closer, like he can burrow right down into the very core of Callum.

"I'm going to make it up to you," Austin murmurs, lips grazing the underside of Callum's jaw. "I won't stop. Every day, I'm going to show you what you mean to me, because I don't want to run from the way you make me feel anymore." he continues. "You make me want to stop being afraid."

Callum tightens the grip he has on Austin's hair, tugging him up until their gazes meet. He looks up at Austin, eyes heavy-lidded as his hand slides to cradle the side of Austin's face. "You don't need to be perfect for me, baby," Callum says. "I know who you are, and I want you as you are. All I ever needed from you was for you to want me, too."

Austin lets his head hang, forehead falling to rest against Callum's as Callum clenches around him, making Austin tremble. "You're unreal, you know that?"

"And you're so fucking beautiful," Callum says. He bucks his hips, wrapping his legs around Austin's waist and flexing his thighs. "So *mine."*

"If you'll have me."

Callum surges up to claim Austin with a thorough kiss. "Only if you

promise to put your back into it."

Austin laughs against Callum's lips, pulling out just enough to forcefully roll his hips forward, coaxing a moan out of Callum's mouth. Callum tastes like everything Austin's ever wanted but never let himself have, not fully, not without one foot already halfway out the door. Austin's only just begun to understand what it's like to have Callum, but he knows what it's like to lose him. It's not something Austin ever intends to do again.

He's all in. He's closing the door definitively behind him, and this time he's not leaving.

End Notes

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